

The University of Chicago

THE PEACE MOVEMENT IN THE
OLD NORTHWEST 1860-1865

A STUDY IN DEFEATISM

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED
TO THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF
THE SOCIAL SCIENCES IN CANDIDACY
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF
PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

1933

By
WOOD GRAY

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A STUDY IN DEFEATISM

Defeatism is a manifestation of public psychology common to nearly all modern or peoples' wars. It may arise either from opposition to the purposes for which the war is being waged or from a conviction, evolving during the course of the struggle, that the prospects of achieving those objectives by such means are unfavorable. Movements of this character are likely to be most marked in democratic societies, where the instrumentalities for enforcing conformity are least developed and traditions of the right of minority dissent are most strongly entrenched. Consequently we find that nearly all of the wars of the United States, up to and including the Civil War, were characterized by important defeatist movements. In the Civil War this sentiment was well developed in various periods of the struggle within the body of each belligerent. As it was a recognized factor in contributing to the failure of the Confederacy the importance of the southern movement has been readily acknowledged and has received considerable study. The northern counterpart, however, has never, it is believed, been given sufficient consideration, for, although the movement failed in the achievement of its purposes, it constituted one of the major problems that had to be faced by those engaged in the attempt to preserve the Union by force of arms. As such it is deserving of attention.

That a considerable part of the northern people would refuse to sustain a war against the South was one of the major

propositions upon which the proponents of secession relied in their expectations of being able to establish an independent Confederacy. This belief related more particularly to the Old Northwest, a section that was thought to be as strongly bound to the South as to the Northeast. The early settlement of the Northwest had been largely by upland southerners, moved by conditions in their old home to follow the courses of rivers leading to the northwest and take up lands in the new territory. As rivers furnished also the chief means for the export of the surplus products of the section, trade relationships had been early established between the Northwest and the South. For nearly half a century after the beginning of southern settlement the Northeast, lacking convenient means of ingress to the new region and separated from it by large tracts as yet unsettled, had had little contact with or influence in the Northwest. However, the construction of canals making available the transportation facilities of the Great Lakes and, in the last decade of the ante-bellum period, the rapid construction of railroads, together with conditions of population pressure within the Northeast, had greatly altered this situation in the last thirty years of the period. By 1860 the population of the Northwest was about equally divided between those who traced their origins to either of the two other major sections, those of immediate foreign extraction holding the balance of power with nearly one-fifth of the total. The export trade and the securing of manufactured goods was almost wholly with the East, although an important local trade was still maintained with the South and the full import of the revolution in trade relations had not been grasped by the public mind. The political story had closely followed that of settlement and trade. Previous to the 1850's there had been general co-operation between this section

and the South, but after the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act the Northwest had entered into a working alliance with the East. Even so, the Democratic party, still looking to a considerable degree to the South for allies, remained a powerful force in every state of the section. At the outbreak of secession the Northwest had strong ties with each of the other great sections, but her interests required the maintenance of the Union. It remained to be seen whether she would support the project of preserving that Union by the armed coercion of the South.

The first reaction of the people of the Northwest to the inauguration of secession was largely one of surprise followed by consternation. The frequency with which such action had been threatened in the past and assurances of Republican spokesmen during the electoral canvass of 1860 had persuaded a great part of the people that such gestures represented an attempt to influence political action rather than expressing a serious intention. When it could no longer be doubted that the movers for southern independence were in earnest, it is probable that a majority in the section expected and would have approved the arrangement of some such compromise as had been successful in the settlement of earlier sectional crises. However, the true decision as to what policy should be adopted lay with those who had been entrusted with office in the North, chiefly members of the Republican party. Being leaders of a party as well as representatives of the people, they were impelled to consider the interests of their organizations as well as the needs of the country. Among the members of both parties there was wide diversity of opinion as to the course best to pursue. Representatives of the radical anti-slavery fringe of the Republican party were willing to consider as good riddance the departure of the slaveholders from the Union; others

of the party would prefer separation to the costs and problematical results of internecine warfare; a third group, in step with the apparent course of public sentiment, would reserve force as the final resort and would first attempt to preserve national unity by all reasonable concessions. They looked chiefly to William H. Seward for leadership. A fourth group believed that neither peaceable disunion nor compromise could be trusted to preserve any remnant of nationality and that either course presaged disaster for their newly victorious party. Largely because of the firm adherence to such views of the president-elect this group was able to force its program upon the party as a whole and thus upon the nation. But few Democrats appeared willing to sustain such a course. A few even expressed approval of the action of the seceded states; a larger number opposed coercion even as a final measure; and the party as a whole was insistent upon compromise. As with the Republicans, party policy and conviction coincided in the program which they adopted. There seemed danger that the Democrats might remain irreconcilably opposed to war even after the Republican administration should have committed the nation to that method of settling the national difficulties. But meanwhile public sentiment in the mass, exasperated by long waiting and non-action, had become ready to accept almost any sort of a clear-cut policy that might be offered. When war came it arose enthusiastically to support the authorities who had chosen this policy.

The news of the firing on Fort Sumter was responded to by spontaneous public gatherings in nearly every local community in which men of all shades of previous political opinions vied with each other in urging united support of the government and volunteers were enlisted for the overcoming of the rebellion. The

response of the state authorities of the Northwest to the call of the president for troops was immediate and wholehearted. Almost without opposition the legislatures voted all necessary measures for the raising, equipping, and maintenance of troops, and until the Battle of Bull Run the state officials seemed in advance of those of the federal government in comprehending the needs of the situation and in taking energetic steps for meeting those needs. The opposition of a few Democrats who remained aloof from the general co-operation and threatened secession movements in southern Illinois and Indiana was dissipated by the action of Stephen A. Douglas in hurrying home to rally all Democrats in a united support of the government. Such men as remained still opposed were left, for the time, impotent. For a few weeks after Bull Run there was hardly a sign of division in sentiment. Volunteering went on with redoubled vigor. Democratic spokesmen displayed a maximum of forbearance in criticizing the policy and actions of the administration. Such men as John A. Logan, whose position had previously been doubtful, themselves joined the army that was preparing to subdue the Confederacy. The autumn elections saw the Union party, which had arisen to claim the allegiance of all unequivocal supporters of the war, generally successful. But evidences of dissent began to appear. The first glow of enthusiasm for volunteering seemed to be fading by the autumn of 1861. Democratic leaders, after Douglas' death, fearing that the eclipse of their party would imperil their own positions, looked about for policies of opposition. They found them in widespread sentiments of jealousy of New England, fears of governmental centralism, and anxiety as to the consequences of a possible emancipation of the negro slaves. Many Republicans, moreover, appeared willing to see a revival of sharp party divisions.

Furthermore, mob actions against critics of the administration or the war aroused much indignation and led to the formation of secret political societies pledged to resist such outrages. Newspaper critics of the war began to speak out more boldly, and the project of a negotiated restoration of the Union as an alternative to the war was revived. Disagreements between the radical and conservative wings of the Republican party produced further discord. But the great cause of discontent at the end of 1861 was the failure of the huge Union military machine to set about the task which it had been hoped that it would be able virtually to complete before winter set in. At the end of the period it seemed that this discontent might find a locus for expression in the Illinois constitutional convention, controlled by Democrats, that was to convene early in the new year.

Fears of a popular reaction against the war were dispelled by the capture of forts Henry and Donelson. Then, as McClellan's grand army of the Potomac began its ponderous advance against Richmond and a succession of Union victories was reported from other quarters, public sentiment swung to an opposite extreme of overconfidence. Such a state of feeling carried with it the possibility of a dangerous reaction should military reverses be encountered. Also, being shared in by federal officials, it led to the discontinuance on April 3, 1862 of the recruiting service. This order not only deprived the government of additional forces that were shortly to be urgently needed but gave impetus to the popular conviction that the war was virtually over. Consequently Lee's check of McClellan in the Seven Days' Battle came as a shock. However, confidence in the ultimate outcome of the war was not greatly shaken. When, during July and August, 1862 calls were issued for 600,000 men, high bounties, the prospect of con-

scription, and the belief that one more great effort would insure the conquest of the South combined to produce the heaviest volunteering of the war. However, this same period of confidence saw the widening of the chasm between Republicans and Democrats. Numerous arbitrary arrests and imprisonments of Democratic leaders of local influence and mob visitations against Democratic newspapers and individuals fostered the belief among members of that party that the war was being directed to its destruction. The prospect of a draft caused great numbers of those liable to military service to attempt flight to parts beyond reach of the enrolling officers, and there had even been some evidences of an intention to resist conscription. Widespread southern sympathy among people of the Northwest made officials fearful that attempts would be made to liberate Confederate prisoners confined there. These influences had contributed to the spread and increasing membership of the Knights of the Golden Circle and similar organizations as an additional threat to the policy of the administration in the prosecution of the war. But the most ominous development was the reinvigoration of the Democratic party as an active instrumentality of opposition. The chief impetus to this movement came from the Democratic Congressmen from the section under the leadership of Clement L. Vallandigham. In May, 1862 this group issued an "Address to the Democracy of the United States" calling upon the party to adopt an aggressive program of opposition to the existing administration. This document pledged support to the war but only so long as it should be waged for purposes and in a manner in conformity with the views of the Democratic party. The call was enthusiastically responded to by members of the party in the Northwest. There was danger, in view of the personal inclinations of the new leadership, that should the Democratic

organization succeed in winning a victory in the fall elections that that victory might be used to prevent the war's being pressed to a victorious conclusion.

The threat of a concerted southern invasion of the North in the early autumn of 1862 produced consternation in the latter section, and even the checking of this offensive failed to compensate for the failure of the Union forward movement of that spring. Consequently the Republican or Union party entered the fall campaigns under a weighty handicap, which was increased by dissatisfaction over the large number of military arrests and by dissensions within the party itself. Astutely avoiding the question of peace, the Democrats concentrated upon two leading issues of arbitrary and allegedly unconstitutional acts of government and the announcement of the forthcoming Proclamation of Emancipation. The latter policy, it was charged, would not only provoke the South to desperate resistance but would be likely to flood the Northwest with free negroes, who would enter into economic competition and inescapable association with the poorer classes of white people of that section. This latter argument was particularly effective with men of southern origin, who retained a strong anti-negro prejudice, and with the Irish laboring elements. Charges that the tariff, taxation, and monetary policies of the administration had been designed to benefit the East at the expense of the West and that the failure of McClellan's campaign had been due to the refusal of the authorities, from political motives, to render him proper support also did effective service for the Democratic cause. The results of the elections gave that party majorities in the congressional delegations of every state of the Northwest except Michigan and gave it legislative control in Indiana and Illinois. But results elsewhere enabled the

president to retain a congressional majority of his party following, and the Democrats were prevented from making greater gains in the states by the fact that the governors of Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio and the legislature of the latter state were not subject to election in that year. The significance of these factors was shortly to appear. Republican politicians recognized that arbitrary governmental action and fears of a freedman inundation of the Northwest had operated against the party, but they credited a general belief that the administration had failed to make effective use of the resources provided for winning the war with being the chief cause for their defeat. Dangers of resistance to conscription, of civilian aid to the escape of Confederate prisoners, widespread desertion, and of obstructionist activities by the secret anti-war societies contributed to the gloomy prospect at the end of 1862. There were, in addition, indications that the Democratic party might shortly assume a position which would cause it to oppose further attempts to restore the Union by war.

Costly Union military repulses and failures at the end of 1862 gave support to the contention of extremists that it was useless to continue the war. Important western leaders of the Democratic party came out openly in avowal of such a view. On January 15, 1863 Vallandigham announced in Congress his plan for ending the war by an armistice in hope of being able eventually to arrange a reconstitution of the Union by conciliation. His position received powerful press support among organs of his party in the West, and other leaders indicated their agreement with his viewpoint. Numerous local mass meetings in the section expressed their approval of the project for peaceful reunion, some of them declaring their opposition to the continuation of the war.

under any circumstances. In all these expressions there was repeated insistence that the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation absolved Democrats from their earlier pledges. In the face of this development the Republican party appeared demoralized and despondent. Divisions within the party became accentuated. To some the military outlook seemed hopeless; the influence of economic discontent growing out of high transportation charges, monetary confusion, and the operation of protective tariffs was recognized; and indications of the intentions of their opponents aroused their apprehensions. An opportunity for definite action on the subject of peace was presented by Democratic control of the legislatures of Indiana and Illinois. In these bodies resolutions looking toward the calling of a national peace convention were introduced, in each case being adopted by the House of Representatives but failing in the Senate. Finally the Republican governors of these states managed to rid themselves of their troublesome legislatures, Governor Yates by prorogation and Governor Morton by taking steps for preventing a quorum. Meanwhile other dangers threatened. Desertion and voluntary capture in the hope of being paroled home among the armies in the field had assumed alarming proportions. Civilians encouraged desertion and attempted to prevent the arrest of those who followed their counsel. The return home of deserters greatly strengthened the anti-war societies and tended to lead them to the assumption of a much more revolutionary program. This had a direct bearing on the problem of recruiting. Realizing that conscription was going to have to be increasingly relied upon to provide recruits the authorities created, in the provost-marshal's service, an elaborate machinery for drafting and the apprehension of deserters. On June 8, 1863 the enrollment of all men of military age was

ordered. A number of cases of resistance to the carrying out of this measure, some of them involving fatalities, were reported from various parts of the Northwest. It was feared that actual drafting might be even more seriously opposed. At the close of the spring the spirits of supporters of the war had begun to revive somewhat due to the thwarting of the project of calling a peace convention and the spread of the Union League movement. But the future was largely contingent on military developments. And the nomination of Vallandigham for the governorship of Ohio, precipitated by Burnside's order of his arrest, created the danger that, unless there should be a reversal of the political current, the government of that pivotal state might fall into the hands of those opposed to rendering any support whatever to the central government.

The tenseness of the military situation of the early summer of 1863 was relieved by Lee's repulse at Gettysburg and Grant's capture of Vicksburg. Confidence in the outcome of the war returned. Republicans who had been highly critical of the administration a short time before began to speak of Lincoln's renomination and re-election as virtually assured. In this return of confidence Vallandigham's campaign for the Ohio governorship was adversely affected. Taking advantage of the revulsion in public sentiment, the Republican leaders in that state pitched their appeal on the broad basis of patriotism, brought out a long-retired Democrat as their candidate, and conducted an energetic campaign to get out every possible vote. By these means Vallandigham was decisively defeated, even though he received a greater number of votes than his party had cast in the state in its victories of the previous year. There still remained the

problem of filling up the ranks of the armies in the field. On March 3d, 1863 a call for 300,000 men had been issued with deficiencies to be drafted for on September 8. The enrollment in preparation for this draft had lagged in Illinois, and during the summer the work in that state had met with considerable resistance. However, a combination of firmness and forbearance on the part of the provost-marshal in charge had carried through the task without serious difficulty. Reports of arming and drilling and assaults on officials of the provost-marshal's service in other parts of the Northwest seemed to promise a formidable resistance when an attempt should be made to draft. Fortunately, the three most restless states of the section were able to fill their quotas under this call by volunteering. Drafting in Michigan and Wisconsin was carried through without hindrance. Relieved of this work the provost-marshals set about arresting deserters and breaking up bands of these men which had been engaging in guerrilla activities. During the winter of 1863-64 new calls for an aggregate of 700,000 men were made. Democratic newspapers and leaders showed a general unwillingness to aid recruiting. The volunteering spirit was dormant, and even with the offer of heavy bounties and the advantage of a small quota due to excesses on former calls Illinois, once the banner volunteering state, was able to meet its requirement only by the advance re-enlistment of its veterans. An attempt in April and May to raise 100,000 troops for one hundred days service without the offer of bounties was a failure. Defeat in Ohio had caused the Peace Democrats to fix their hopes upon capturing the national organization in 1864. Checked in the Ohio state convention of the spring of that year they redoubled their efforts to capture the delegates to the national convention

from the congressional districts. Meanwhile other opponents of the war were plotting through the secret societies to overturn the existing government by revolution. Securing a more centralized organization in the Order of American Knights, converted into the Sons of Liberty, they placed Vallandigham at their head and joined forces with Confederate agents in Canada. Plans were laid for an uprising which would free and arm the Confederate prisoners. The combined forces would then seize the state governments and bring the war to an end.

The project for an insurrectionary uprising in the Northwest now suffered from a resurgence of the political peace movement. Disappointment in the slow progress of the armies of Grant and Sherman had revived hopes of being able to bring the war to an end by legitimate means. This change had been marked by the election of many peace advocates as delegates from the Northwest to the Democratic national convention. A complicating element in the situation was the call for 500,000 additional recruits of July 19, 1864. Not only were serious apprehensions of formidable resistance to conscription under this call entertained, but its effect on the political outlook was feared. In the face of these dangers the Republicans were engaged in quarrelling among themselves. Lincoln's renomination had been effected in the face of strong Radical opposition. An independent nomination of Fremont threatened to draw off the German vote, and, as hopes in the war sank lower, there was a movement within the party to replace Lincoln with some other candidate, perhaps Chase. During this time the attempts of the would-be revolutionists to bring about an uprising had repeatedly gone awry. Finally it was determined to precipitate revolt at Chicago under cover of the Democratic convention. Confederate agents were to be on hand to

lead the outbreak, and the prisoners at Camp Douglas were to be set free. The situation in the Democratic party led to a bargain being struck at the Chicago convention between the eastern and western leaders. A war Democrat was nominated for the presidency, and the vice-presidential nominee and the platform were arranged to suit the peace men. At the same time the Northwestern Conspiracy ended in fiasco. The prospect of political victory, uncertainty as to their own resources, and the strengthening of the garrison at Camp Douglas caused the abandonment of the plot by mutual agreement of the parties to it. As the convention ended, the chances for McClellan's election appeared excellent. There were reasons for believing that a Democratic victory which would give the party control of both the national government and of a number of states might lead to the abandonment of the war even at the cost of disunion. McClellan's private position was somewhat equivocal, and other candidates for state positions were definitely committed to the peace position.

Hopes of a Democratic victory were rudely shattered by Sherman's capture of Atlanta and Sheridan's successful campaign in the Shenandoah Valley. Bickerings among the Republicans died down and were succeeded by united efforts to bring about Lincoln's re-election. The harmful effect of the brightening of the military skies upon Democratic chances was evidenced by the desperate attempts of a portion of the party press to minimize the Federal victories. McClellan's attempt in his letter of acceptance to correct the strategical error of the Democratic platform was unavailing. The party had too fully committed itself to the peace issue to be able successfully to retract. In addition, McClellan's action alienated many of the thoroughgoing peace advocates and a movement was inaugurated by extremists of that group to repudiate

his candidacy. Nevertheless, the Republican party was still embarrassed by the possible political influence of the impending draft, some features of which had aroused much discontent and were being assiduously used by the Democrats as campaign material. Correcting the most annoying features of the regulations, the administration carried the work through. It was expected by the authorities that, in the existing state of public feeling, such an exhibition of an energetic determination to press the war to a successful conclusion would have a better political effect than a postponement of the draft until after the election. With the issues that were most likely to be embarrassing out of the way, the Republicans found effective campaign material against their opponents in exposures of the secret anti-war societies. They were able to involve a portion of the Democratic leaders sufficiently in the matter to discredit, in a measure, the whole party. The election consequently revolved on the single important issue of whether the war should be fought out on existing lines. The result was completely favorable to the Republicans. At the same time the final attempt of the Confederate agents and the Copperhead plotters to bring about an insurrectionary uprising was balked by the federal authorities. The results of the elections of 1864, as it turned out, sealed the doom of the Confederacy. Gloomy prophecies of irreconcilable opponents of the war and the futile efforts of a few men to arrange a settlement of the controversy by negotiation only accentuated the failure of the peace movement. And yet the apathetic response to the last call for troops, even in the face of approaching victory, showed that the earlier enthusiasm for the war had almost wholly departed from the Northwest.

In concluding, it may be noted that those persons who were identified with the defeatist movement in the Old Northwest during the Civil War were of two types. One was composed of those who opposed the purposes and aims of the war, either from the beginning or after the introduction of the abolition of slavery as an added objective in the midst of the conflict. A second group, to be found more among the inarticulate mass of the people (politicians feeling the need of consistent adherence to a position), desired the war to succeed but despaired, when military reverses were encountered, of the possibility of victory. Members of the former type were impelled to their position by various motives. One was racial. Men of southern origin quite naturally felt a sentimental bond with the people of their old home. The Irish, fearing freed negroes as economic and social competitors, were subject to wholesale disaffection. Old political habits operated strongly with many who feared that the war was being directed against the principles and interests of the Democratic party. Social factors played their part. The poor and ignorant resented being forced into support of a war, the burdens of which they believed they were being made to bear. Individuals and sections who had had important commercial relationships with the South mourned avenues of trade cut off by the war. Still other men felt the pinch of high rates of transportation for their products arising from wartime conditions, thus foreshadowing the agrarian protest that was to follow the war. Depreciated currency and other factors operated to raise the cost of living and thus injure many who depended on wages or fixed incomes. Some were led to oppose the war for personal reasons, often the outgrowth of hatreds arising from earlier political encounters. Frequently an individual was influenced by a combination of the racial,

political, social, economic, and personal factors just indicated. On the other hand, those adhering to the movement from discouragement in the progress of the war belonged to a common type to be found in all such conflicts. Expecting at the opening of the struggle that the fighting will be brief, comparatively bloodless, and overwhelmingly victorious, such natures, when reverses come, are readily cast down to contrasting depths of despondency. In such a state of mind they are likely to support those opposing the war on principle.

Those people who desired to bring the war to a close had two means by which they might achieve their purpose. One was political, through the instrumentality of the Democratic party. In view of the responsibility for the support of the war resting upon the state authorities, it was not necessary for the success of the peace movement to displace the national administration. That the Peace Democrats failed to gain control of some of the western states and thus be in a position where they might cripple the prosecution of the war was due less to shortcomings in their own strength or determination than to circumstances beyond their control. As has been indicated in the body of this dissertation these circumstances were of two kinds. Among the first were the facts that Ohio had its state elections in the odd, instead of the even, numbered years and that, except in 1862, the military outlook for the Union armies was always bright at the times of important elections with periods of discouragement confined to other times. The second possible method of bringing the war to a close, that of revolutionary action, was similarly affected. In spite of its somewhat ludicrous denouement, this movement did have in it possibilities of being able to influence the outcome of the war had circumstances been favorable.

It should finally be noted that the significance of the peace movement was not confined to the war itself. There is general recognition that the most important development in modern America has been the rise to dominance of an industrial hierarchy. One means by which this dominance has been achieved has been through the use of political power. And yet such power could hardly have been obtained had the South and West, sections whose interests were in reality closely identified, been able to bring a united opposition to bear against it. The division in political action between the two sections has been largely an emotional one, arising from memories of the bitter struggle and its aftermath. One factor in the unwillingness of men of the West to join those of the South in the Democratic party, which was the most suitable instrument for opposing the advance of the industrial oligarchy, was the record of the Democrats in the North during the war. Reconciliation was not impossible with an open opponent, but it was hard to join hands with men in one's own section who had seemed intent upon the betrayal of their country in its time of peril.¹ In short the peace movement was in large part a product of ante-bellum conditions, was a real obstacle to the maintenance of the Union by force of arms, and has left its mark upon the story of modern America.

¹For examples of appeals to this sentiment by Republican organs in post war political campaigns see The Chicago Daily Tribune, September 20, 1866, March 18, 1867, September 21, 22, 1876, October 21, 1878; Joliet (Illinois) Republican, June 27, 1868; Burlington (Iowa) Hawkeye, quoted in The Chicago Daily Tribune, August 4, 1880.

